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ABSTRACT

The history of higher education in the U. S. traditionally has been characterized by the same kinds of studies as most other American history: ones that focus on the experiences or concerns of the authors. What such history ignores is the group that for most of this century comprised about 40 percent or more of the undergraduate student body and about 20-25 percent of the faculties; namely, women. The difficulty of looking at the history of women in higher education through the same methodological lens as men is that the focus on success brings forth a set of women that is significantly different from the other women educators and from other women. Investigations of backgrounds of successful women faculty and administrators suggest that many of these women have had one of two experiences: attending an all-girl's high school or college or coming from an immigrant family. In single sex institutions, a teacher can support and encourage her students vigorously in a fashion that is rare in coeducational institutions where both faculty and students often tend to regard male students as more meritorious of academic consideration. Other areas that need further study concerning women are discussed including the influence of sororities, the role of the academic wife, influence of college life on women students, effects of coeducational institutions on women, and sex-linked curricula. (Author/PG)

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Women in Higher Education: A Biographical Inquiry

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The history of higher education in the United States traditionally has been characterized by the same kinds of studies as most other American history: ones that focused upon the experiences or concerns of the authors. Often these histories have been institutional, that is of particular colleges or universities. Sometimes they have dealt with ideas about higher education, such as academic freedom, the elective system, or the German influence on American scholarship.

In addition to these kinds of histories of higher education there has been an important third: biographical studies. Typically these have been individual biographies of leading educators, most often a college president, such as Ezra Stiles, Charles William Eliot, or Nicholas Murray Butler. Occasionally the subject of study has been a leading scholar, such as William James or John Dewey.

With the exception of the mandatory eulogistic histories of institutions prepared by a fond alumnus, most of these studies in the history of higher education have emphasized the major institutions and the leaders in these places. Relatively little has been written about students except for an obligatory chapter or two telling of periodic student disturbances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries followed by an amusing section on the importance of athletics. The theme that runs through the entire history of higher education in the United States is that higher education has been dominated by men and that the most interesting persons to be understood in its histories have been the leaders, also men. Presumably

the many men who were also actively engaged in higher education, as students and as less distinguished faculty, were simply faint carbon copies of the successful men.

What such history ignores, of course, is that group who for most of this century made up about 40 percent or more of the undergraduate student body, occasionally as much as thirty percent of the doctorates, and generally about twenty or twenty-five percent of the faculties. The place where this group was singularly not represented was in the leadership positions in American higher education. This group, of course, was composed of women.

The women's colleges have had their enthusiastic alumnae historians, just as the men's colleges and coeducational ones have. Occasionally a woman college president, such as M. Carey Thomas, has had a biographer, or more frequently, has become autobiographical in her retirement, as Virginia Gildersleeve did. Sometimes a devoted husband has written a memoir about his distinguished wife, as George Herbert Palmer did about Alice.

The difficulty, however, of looking at the history of women in higher education through the same methodological lens as men is that the focus upon success brings forth a set of women that is significantly different from the other women educators and from other women. The assumption has been made, and probably rightly so although we are not sure, that the men who are successful, and the ones who are not, are essentially similar. The successful ones are implicitly assumed simply to have more of certain useful qualities than the men who are less successful. For example, they are a little more able, have a little more drive. Whether such assumptions can legitimately be made about men may be questionable, but they certainly cannot be made accurately about the successful women in higher education.

The external circumstances that limit women's participation in higher education, both historically and presently, are legion. One example, the fact that the majority of women (and men, too, of course) expect

to marry, is illustrative. This decision, fully sanctioned by society, has had disastrous consequences for women's success and even participation in higher education at faculty and administrative levels. At least in this one respect the men who are leaders in higher education are very similar to other men involved in higher education and to all men in the population. Over 90 percent are married with children. For women the percentages are staggeringly different. Studies done at the turn of the century report less than half the graduates of Mount Holyoke and one quarter of the Bryn Mawr graduates marrying.[1] Inflation having crept into higher education, comparable figures now apply to women receipients of the doctorate, the majority of whom have not married. For women college presidents, an extremely rare breed, almost all are either single or widowed. If one simply looks at the presidents of the Seven Sisters Women's Colleges for the past thirty-five years, -- institutions which have probably treated women better than any others in the country, one finds just over half (thirteen of the twenty-three persons who were presidents of these institutions) are women.[2] Needless to say, no woman has ever been president of a men's college, and only exceedingly rarely of a coed college. One thinks of Jacquelyn Wexler at Hunter and Gail Parker at Bennington, both institutions which until recently were women's colleges. Of these thirteen, only two (Millicent McIntosh and Matina Horner) have been married at the time they were appointed. Not surprisingly, all the men have been married when they assumed the presidencies.

Apart from the external circumstances affecting women's opportunities for success in higher education, one must consider the internal difficulties as well. Here again we return to the now familiar pattern of women's reluctance to achieve success. As has been noticed by sensitive observers of American society for many years and has recently been documented by Matina Horner and others, many women experience genuine personal ambivalence about achieving success, while men on the whole do not. Women understand that

recognized achievement will bring them difficulties. They do not need a sociologist or historian to tell them that they will be less likely to marry if they get a PhD than if they don't. They may decide that it is worthwhile to get the doctorate in order to have the opportunity to do fulfilling work. They will take what risks there are about finding a suitable husband. Many women certainly have. The point is that there is a greater risk for a woman in those circumstances than there is for a man, and the pool of women who consequently make that decision is smaller than the pool of men. Those kinds of decisions which apply to women - and not to men - define the group in a way in which the men's pool is not so limited. The women who have become successful as adults in higher education, therefore, have gone through a more finely meshed screening process than have the men. They have made a series of decisions or benefited from unexpected circumstances that have led them to their present eminence. Such events distinguish them from their less recognized sisters and make the writing of the history of women in higher education difficult. In short, to write about the history of successful women in higher education is to distort the record of women's experience in higher education much more than to write about the history of successful men in higher education is to distort men's experience in higher education.

What are the consequences of such a conclusion? One obviously is to clarify what the factors were that tended to prodcue outstanding women faculty and administrators. Such exercises in collective biography are now beginning. I think particularly of my colleague Robert McCaughey's efforts to characterize the Barnard College faculty from 1889 to the present. The Barnard faculty, nearly unique in the United States, has maintained an approximately fifty-fifty balance of men and women throughout its history. Jill Conway's collective portrait of the first generation of college women, in which she focuses on such successful women as Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and Lillian Wald is an interesting and provocative study.[3] Another

is Margaret Rossiter's study of early American women scientists.[4] A contemporary and fascinating source is the series of autobiographical statements prepared for the New York Academy of Sciences conference on women in science by twelve successful women.[5] A less biographical but very useful study is Helen Astin's on women doctorates in America.[6] Jonathan Cole, also a colleague at Barnard, is currently working on a matched sample of male and female American scientists.

My own preliminary investigations of backgrounds of successful women faculty and administrators suggest that many of these women have had one of two experiences: attending an all-girls high school or college or coming from an immigrant family. My hunch is that the former of these, attendance at an all-female institution as an adolescent, is important for women who subsequently pursue a doctorate because the teen age academic experience can be isolated from other, compelling adventures at that age. Perhaps even more important, a teacher can support and encourage her vigorously in a fashion that is rare in coeducational institutions where both faculty and students often tend to regard male students as more meritorious of academic consideration. The immigrant experience may be important because the daughter of a family which has encountered two cultural modes, that is, the American one in which they are presently immersed and the one from which they came, may be less likely to accept the monolithic authority of the American standard for women. She may be less likely, in particular, to believe that the appropriate role for the American woman is to remain in a socially subsidiary position in the home. This is not to suggest that the appropriate roles for women in the societies from which the immigrants came or in America are very different; probably they are not. Rather, the experience of transit from one society to another may give one the opportunity to relativize cultural norms.

Again on the basis of my preliminary work the group most significantly

under-represented (and, conversely, over-represented among men in studies of origins of American scientists) are middle class girls who attended coeducational institutions.[7] Since presently over 95 percent of female undergraduates are enrolled in coeducational institutions and immigration has been vastly reduced, these observations have important implications for policy for women's education today.

Useful as I believe these efforts at collective biography of women scholars are, I believe that it is necessary to issue at least two caveats. One is that heretofore the numbers of women who can be identified as "successful" at any given time is so small that group portraits of the kinds being discussed here may be inappropriate. It may be that the factors that led to the women's successes were highly individual. Secondly, any studies in collective biography are subject to the charge that they dwell primarily upon the external, social factors that influenced the persons and not the internal, psychological ones, which may have been more important. Any group portraits then are skewed away from consideration of psychological dimensions. Psychohistory is difficult enough to do well with a single individual; it is impossible with a group.

Despite these caveats about collective biography, the areas in which it seems most useful are those in which the largest numbers of women in higher education were to be found in the late nineteenth and in this century. These were not the "deviant geniuses" who were the reknown scholars and college presidents. Rather, at the faculty level these are the women who taught at the normal schools and teachers colleges; at the small coeducational colleges; at black colleges; at Roman Catholic women's colleges; and the corps who occupied the bottom rungs and peripheral positions in the larger colleges and universities. Finally, the women's college faculties, particularly those secular ones located in isolated regions, are a fascinating group to study. In what ways were these women similar to or different from

their male colleagues at their institutions and their female colleagues at other institutions. To what extent were their choices of jobs limited by their lack of mobility? What were their family circumstances? How have their situations changed over time?

One of the interesting questions to explore is the degree to which a predominantly female society developed among these women faculty, especially among those who were not married. The consequences of such an exclusively female social set are fascinating to speculate about, particularly as women who found such a group congenial might prefer to remain within it, rather than venturing into the predominantly male enclaves of higher education. The influence of these modes of life on women students is also curious. Whether young women would deliberately choose the academic life if that is what they perceived it to be is unclear.

The other principal fruitful area for collective biography is for women students. What little we know about female students in the aggregate is that they are usually better prepared (as defined by previous academic grades and by standardized test scores) than male students and that fewer female students from impoverished backgrounds than male students from similar backgrounds attend college. Most importantly, we know that the proportion of women undergraduates is less than of men undergraduates; in 1920, approximately 47 percent of the undergraduates were women; in 1963, about 38 percent and currently about 40 percent. In the 1920's, women were receiving 15 percent of the doctorates. From a low in the 1960's of less than 10 percent, they are now receiving about 13 percent annually.[8]

Although there has been some speculation about the college influence on students, few have looked particularly at the specific influence of college life on women students. Mary Elizabeth Tidball has advanced some provocative hypotheses about the impact of a woman's college on women undergraduates.[9] If we adopt women's subsequent academic success as one

index of the effect of the college education, then we must admit at once that the women's colleges have been inordinately successful with their graduates It is important, however, to heed Mary Bunting's observation: "With a few exceptions, notably M. Carey Thomas at Bryn Mawr, our educational institutions, public and private, have not even pretended that the production of professional women leaders was a major objective. Given prevailing attitudes, such a goal could have frightened away many applicants and added to the isolations and burdens of those who did dare to attend."[10]

Nevertheless, the non-Catholic women's colleges in the East have produced women PhD's way out of proportion to their numbers. All but two of the women presidents of the Seven Sisters Colleges in the last 35 years attended a women's college, though not necessarily the one she later led. In Helen Astin's study of the women doctorates in America from the late nineteen-fifties, seven of the 24 leading undergraduate schools which these women had attended were non-sectarian women's colleges.[11] First was Hunter, followed by Barnard. At the time these women were undergraduates, probably less than ten percent of female undergraduates were enrolled in single-sex institutions, the vast majority of which were Roman Catholic ones. Such a finding inevitably raises questions about the potency of these institutions in sending their graduates into higher education in such numbers. One obvious issue is whether these girls were already pre-selected by having chosen initially to attend a woman's college. That question will indeed be difficult to answer. Another is whether the students at the women's colleges came from a social and economic stratum of society that encouraged young women to continue their studies. Undoubtedly the family circumstances of students at Vassar and Wellesley, however, were not markedly different from those at Stanford and Reed.

Since the vast majority of women undergraduates were at coeducational institutions, it is even more important to learn about the experiences of

students there. We can infer that their opportunities for academic success were less at coeducational institutions than at the women's colleges, although for men (based on the Knapp and Greenbaum studies) the coeducational liberal arts colleges were principal sources of American male scholars. Why the coeducational institutions were less hospitable to women's academic aspirations is difficult to determine. One factor may simply be faculty support for women's intellectual development. In women's colleges professors, either male or female, had to encourage women students; they are the only ones they have. Given the choice, apparently, faculty members, again either male or female, will support men students before women. In favoring men students professors are making a very reasonable bet, if we assume that professors favor students who will replicate them. Indeed, it has been more likely for bright men students to become distinguished professors than it has been for bright women students to become distinguished professors. Presumably the women professors were seeking professorial followers more strongly than they were women professorial followers. Obviously there are other factors influencing professorial support, but one surely is the professor's desire for eminent persons to attribute their start in a field to a supportive professor.

Another subject about which we know relatively little has been the effect of streaming women into sex-linked curricula in institutions where there are courses other than liberal arts ones. For example, in many state universities the girls predominate in the home economics courses and in elementary education. These girls who may make an early, untutored choice for these fields may find it difficult to subsequently transfer into a course which will lead them into broader paths.

We also know very little about the informal college life of young women. We need much more substantial studies of the changing impact of sororities on the campuses. At many coeducational institutions sororities have traditionally led all the other housing units on the campus in grades,

but few sororities have exerted intellectual leadership either on the campus or for the girls themselves.

Finally, what has been the role in the history of women in higher education of the academic wife, that long-suffering creature typically acknowledged in the preface of her husband's monograph as "my beloved wife without whose help this book would never have been possible." Often that rather flowery sentiment is literally true, but until recently the wife's public contribution has been social, not scholarly. In many instances the wife's research assistance has indeed been crucial. In other instances her typing has been a godsend. Whatever their contributions, many academic wives have substantially assisted their husbands in their work. On the whole this kind of assistance has not been available to women scholars. Those women who are married usually do not have a spouse with as much free time as men do. Perhaps this situation too is changing as the testimony of a recent preface by a woman author suggests: "My husband has contributed to many discusssions of these ideas. But perhaps a sign of greater progress - for ideas are not difficult for him - he merits thanks for doing some of the typing."[12]

April, 1974

Footnotes

1. Mabel Newcomer, A Century of Higher Education for Women New York: Harper, 1969, p. 212.

2. Presidents of Seven Sisters Colleges Since 1939 (see table)

3. Jill Conway, "The First Generation of American Women Graduates" unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.

4. Margaret Rossiter, "Women Scientists in America Before 1920," unpublished paper, 1973.

5. Ruth Kundsin, ed., Women and Success New York: William Morrow, 1973.

6. Helen S. Astin, The Woman Doctorate in America New York: Russell Sage, 1969.

7. Robert H. Knapp and Joseph J. Greenbaum, The Younger American Scholar: His Collegiate Origins Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

8. Table 103 Historical Summary of Faculty, Students, Degrees, and Finances in Institutions of Higher Education: United States, 1869-70 to 1968-69, Digest of Educational Statistics, Washington D.C., U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Government Printing Office, 1971, p. 77.

9. Mary Elizabeth Tidball, "The Undergraduate Education of Women: A Wanton Waste of Talent," unpublished paper, 1972.

10. Mary I. Bunting, "Education: A Nurturant if not a Determinant of Professional Success," in Annals of New York Academy of Science, March 15, 1973, p. 194.

11. Astin, op cit., Appendix E, p. 181.

12. Jean Baker Miller, ed., Psychoanalysis and Women Baltimore: Penguin, 1973, p. xv.

Presidents of Seven Sister Colleges Since 1939

Barnard:	Virginia Gildersleeve	1911-1947	S
	Millicent McIntosh	1947-1962	M
	Rosemary Park	1962-1967	M-late '65
	Martha Peterson	1967-	S
Bryn Mawr	Katherine McBride	1942-1970	S
	Harris Wofford	1970-	M
Mount Holyoke	Roswell Gray Ham	1937-1957	
	Richard Gettell	1957-1968	M
	David Truman	1969-	M
Radcliffe	Ada Comstock Notestein	1923-1943	M-late '43
	William K. Jordan	1943-1960	
	Mary Ingraham Bunting	1960-1972	W
	Matina Horner	1972-	M
Smith	William Allan Neiborn	1917-1939	
	/Elizabeth Cutler Morrow Acting President 1939-40/		
	Herbert Davis	1940-1949	M
	Benjamin F. Wright	1949-1959	M
	Thomas C. Mendenhall	1959-	M
Vassar	Henry Noble MacCracken	1915-1946	M
	Sarah Gibson Blanding	1946-1964	M
	Alan Simpson	1964-	M
Wellesley	Mildred McAffee Horton	1936-1949	S;M'45
	Margaret Clapp	1949-1966	S
	Ruth Adams	1966-1972	S
	Barbara Newell	1972-	W